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ABSTRACT

Based on Daniel Pader's philosophy that "pleasure and enthusiasm must be the first (and at times the only) goal of an English teacher," this paper discusses the use of best sellers and current literature in remedial and freshman English classes. Best sellers were used as the basis for class discussion and provided topics for themes in the remedial classes. In the freshman English classes, best sellers were included in the list of books to be used as a basis for the research paper in an attempt to determine whether high interest level, low readability level books motivated students toward fuller research and better writing. Furthermore, the instructor tested the readability level of the books using Rudolph Flesch's "Reading Ease" Formula and the Fry Test of Readability. Table 1 lists the books used in the freshman English course and provides grade level equivalents for each using the Flesch formula. Table 2 contains Fry's graph for estimating reading levels and Table 3 demonstrates an analysis of a 100 word text using the Flesch Readability scale. (LL)

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Best Sellers as a Research Tool: High Interest, Low Readability Level

It all began when I became hooked on Hooked on Books, an English program originally devised by Daniel Fader for the W. J. Maxey Boys' Training School in Whitmore Lake, Michigan. It was Fall, 1971, and I was designing a course for a remedial, non-baccalaureate credit English class at Columbus College. Dr. Fader made several recommendations concerning the philosophy of an English class. The first is "that the approach to literature be social rather than literary."[1] I found myself agreeing with his premise that "pleasure and enthusiasm must be the first (and at times the only) goal of an English teacher."[2] The important question, he notes, is "What will they read?' and not 'What should they read?' If teachers of English view themselves first as purveyors of pleasure rather than as instructors in skill, they may find that skill will also flourish where pleasure has been cultivated."[3]

Armed with this philosophy, I asked my remedial class how many had seen the movie "Love Story." Sighs of pleasure as hands shot into the air. I then instructed them to borrow or buy a paperback copy of the book and read it within the next two weeks. Interestingly enough, most chose to purchase the book, and carrying a non-textbook, #1 current best seller, seemed to enhance their self-image. Keep in mind that these were students who had been refused admittance into our baccalaureate program. The discussion of the book two weeks later was on enthusiastic one. We moved the chairs into a circle and talked the entire fifty minute class period plus. Even the formerly quiet ones joined in as they argued such points as "Was the father, Oliver Barrett, entirely at fault? Did the son really try to communicate? Would Oliver have shown greater love seeking finanical aid from his father so that Jenny wouldn't have had to work so hard?" Students were loud and passionate in their defense of the young people, or surprisingly, in some cases, in their defense of the father. They took pride in

CS 003 657

saying, "I'm right. Just look on page ...." They could actually defend their opinions with textual proof. There was little groaning then when at the next class meeting I asked them to read another book and this time to write about it. The second book was selected from a list of former or present best sellers, and their writing assignment was based on the motivation of the protagonist, or "What made him tick?" The class showed quite a bit of insight as influences such as environment, parents, close friends were noted. The papers showed a maturity of thought as well as expression.

All right, a remedial English class had read more enthusiastically and had written not only more willingly, but more competently. What had I learned and could I apply the lesson to my freshman English classes? One of the major requirements of Communications 102 (Freshman English) at Columbus College is the writing of a research paper. Would having students read high interest level, low readability level books motivate them toward fuller research and better writing? Being a member of the inching, not plunging into the water school, I began by including a few best sellers in my list of books to be used as a basis for the research paper. And I noticed some scattered but interesting results. First of all, the students who chose the best sellers enjoyed reading what was current. Those chosing the same book began arriving a few minutes before class and discussing various aspects of the book. Later in the quarter Vonnegut's Breakfast of Champions was both defended and attacked in two enthusiastic, well-researched papers, and I stored Breakfast in my mind for future class use. One young woman, seeing me on campus the week after the course, thanked me for helping her socially. It seems she attended a party and found herself joining in a discussion on books. She had read one of the authors being bandied about and had heard of several of the others through her classmates' discussions. While she did admit faking greater knowledge than she actually possessed, she felt great about her modicum of knowledge.

And again I echoed Dr. Fader's feelings, this time during a discussion of movie vs. book. Dr. Fader wrote of a student at the bottom of a large city tenth grade who excitedly told a classmate, "I don't care if you seen the movie. You got to read the book."[4] Thankfully, my student's comment was expressed more grammatically, but equally as enthusiastically. The book was James Dickey's Deliverance. One boy had just said he had seen the movie and he asked was the book different. The other student responded "Oh, yes. In the movie you didn't really understand why the men take the canoe trip. In the book the characters are more fully developed. You understand them and what drives them." Once more I mentally stored a book for use in another freshman class.

August, 1975. Preparation for another series of freshman composition courses. Why not present them with a book list culled entirely from best seller lists and paperback best seller lists? I consulted The Reader's Digest 1975 Almanac and The Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information, 1974 edition, for best sellers of the immediate past and The N. Y. Times Book Review for current best-sellers, both in hard cover and paperback. I particularly wanted the majority of the books to be obtainable in paperback, as I felt most of the students would prefer owning an inexpensive paperback to borrowing a hardback from the library. Time proved me right although I found several students insisted on purchasing the more expensive hardback edition of their books. I also deliberately did not have our campus bookstore order the books. A literary camaraderie was established as students would inform one another concerning the whereabouts of the books. "You reading The War Between the Tates? Waldenbook's got it."

The books I selected for my freshman composition are listed in Table 1. I will admit to manipulating my findings so that the list in part reflects my own leisure reading. My project, of course, afforded me a wonderful opportunity for guilt free reading of the type my town friends were doing. You will notice the grade level equivalent assigned to each book on the list. As I prepared the

list, I became curious. I knew by virtue of the fact that the books were best sellers, particularly the paperback best sellers, that they must have high interest level, but I wondered about their actual readability level. Consulting one of our instructors in the remedial program, I found that there are several readability formulas which can provide objective measurements of the difficulty of reading materials. When I found out that our computer could handle and apply Rudolph Flesch's "Reading Ease" Formula, I jubilantly fed passages from the novels into the computer and awaited the results. Now, upon what criteria is his test predicated? According to Flesch, brevity is the key concept: the fewer the syllables per word and the fewer the words per sentence, the lower the readability level. Thus, if you were to utilize his formula, without the aid of a computer, you would count the number of syllables in each 100-word passage you were sampling. Record the number of syllables per hundred words. Next count the number of sentences in the 100 word passage. Then compute the number of words per sentence in the passage. Record this number. By drawing a diagonal line from the number in the words-per-sentence column to the syllables-per-100 words column, you will arrive at a Reading-Ease Score which can be converted to a grade level equivalent.

Information on the Flesch test can be found in Dr. Flesch's book The Art of Readable Writing published by Harper & Brothers in 1949. Should you be interested in a test to determine readability, and should you prefer an alternate test, Table 2 contains the Fry Test with both directions and a graph for estimating readability. I found it is a simple test to administer without the aid of a computer.

I mentioned a 100 word passage, but concerned that one sample might not be typical of the whole book, I chose two 100 word passages, using pages 75 and 150 in each novel. Of course, actually all that I had to do was select the 100 word passages and type the words onto computer cards. Our computer did all

the rest and provided me with the summary results for the two samples. Table 3 demonstrates an analysis of a 100 word text. Note that the analysis includes the distribution of words by syllables, the number of sentences, number of words, number of syllables, average sentence length, average syllables per word, as well as the Flesch Index, Dale Index, and Grade Level Equivalent. Not included in the Flesch Test but also provided by our computer was a total vocabulary per passage and the ratio to total words in text. This variable was added to GMSTAR by a colleague at Columbus College, James Chappell. The GMSTAR Program itself, which is an acronym for General Motors Computerized Simple Test Approach for Readability, was adopted for use in our system by another colleague, Dr. John R. Talburt. GMSTAR is in the public domain.

Of course both the Flesch and the Fry tests are restricted measurements. The tests, for instance, cannot take into consideration factors such as allusions which might be obscure to the general reader, the referential quality of words, the lack of transitions, or the sophistication of the plot. Updike's A Month of Sundays, for instance, I felt was in actuality more difficult than the seventh grade level assigned to it, and "bizarre," found in one passage from The Seven Per Cent Solution, while a two syllable word, is not a common vocabulary item. The Flesch "Reading Ease" formula, however, does assign the approximate level of difficulty and does so objectively. Incidentally, the state of Pennsylvania, beginning in 1975, now requires that auto-insurance policies must rate a minimum of 40 on the Flesch Readability Scale, which is still rated as difficult reading material. Rudolph Flesch would like to see the policies rate a 60 on his scale, the level of Sports Illustrated or the N. Y. Daily News.

Fortified with the knowledge that books were accessible, interesting, and readable on my student's level, I handed out the book list to my classes. Many, of course, had seen the movie Jaws and some remarked that The Great

Train Robbery was being made into a movie. The books from the first seemed alive. A few students had read Jaws and recommended it enthusiastically. Now I would like to stop here for a moment and digress. Yes, I know Jaws is not the novel which answers an English instructor's prayer, or even warms her heart. But I also know the vast majority of my students are not English majors. They will never read a novel by Charles Dickens just for fun and relaxation. But they might include reading as one of their hobbies if they are not made to feel that contemporary best selling novels are just a cut above skin picture magazines. I was particularly delighted to learn at the end of each quarter that several students had gone on to read a second novel on the list.

Meanwhile back at the classroom--after the students had exhausted their classmates' meager knowledge of the books, they asked me what the novels were about. I fed them one-line bait from the N. Y. Times, such as Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sky: "British super spy quits retirement to track down his Soviet counterpart" or The Summer Before the Dark: "Realistic story of a 45-year old wife and mother who suddenly finds herself not needed and attempts a new life-style." If these one-liners sound like promotions for T.V. detective stories and soap operas, fine. One of my goals was to wean them from the idea that T.V. is the only enjoyable medium. And I wanted them to notice the books in the drug store, the ones above the Penthouse shelf.

Now to move from current best sellers to magazines which are read for their words. In fact, one of the strongest arguments for using best sellers as the basis for research papers is that students are introduced to critical writing in current periodicals. If you happen to teach in an urban college, such as mine, or in any college which has a fairly open admissions policy, ask your class to write down, unsigned, what periodicals they read at all-not just with regularity. Even allowing for those who do read, and those who

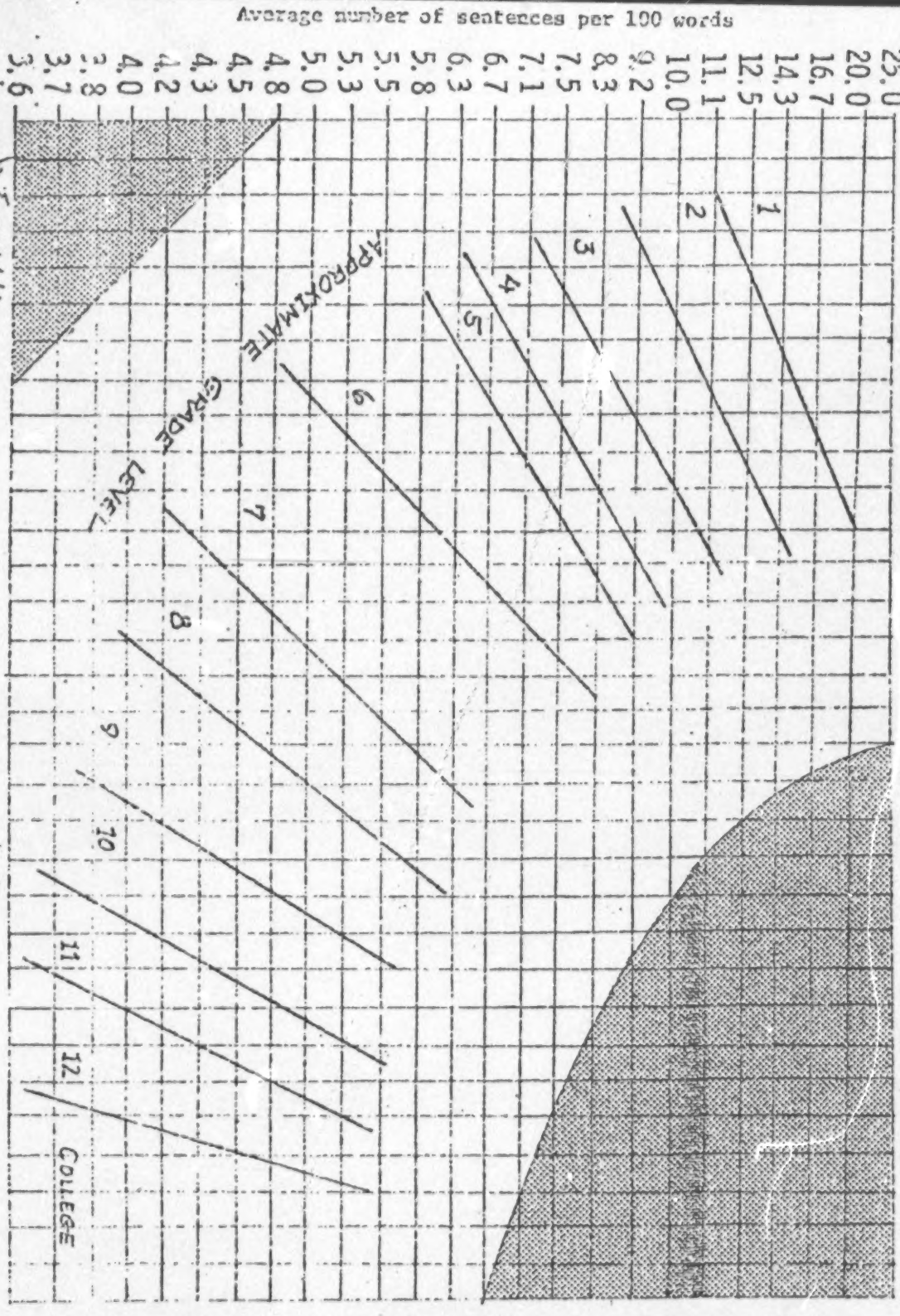
will fake it, you might be surprised. Thus, unlike books reviewed solely in scholarly journals or in other generation's magazines, best sellers can serve as a springboard into periodicals which are easier to read because of their style, and more interesting to freshmen because of their currency. Incidentally, here are some spin-off benefits for frazzled nerves: Since all research will be found on microfilm, microfiche, or periodicals which cannot be checked out, you will never hear the complaint, "I couldn't do my research. All the books on A Farewell to Arms are already checked out." And while I cannot promise you that your students won't copy material from these periodicals, I can guarantee you will never read transposed Monarch or Cliff Notes again. You will also never encounter recycled papers of former students, your own or your colleagues, not as long as you keep deleting, keep adding, and keep reading. And the easily available research material keeps steadily in step in magazines which run the gamut from Atlantic and The N. Y. Times to Time and Newsweek. Best sellers, then, provide high interest level, low readability level primary sources, the student has leeway in choosing his secondary sources, and with his changing attitude toward reading, hopefully there is also a changing attitude toward writing.

Table 1

The Grade Level Equivalent was arrived at by applying the Flesch "Reading Ease" formula to two 100-word passages taken from pages 75 and 150 in each novel.

Adams, Richards	Watership Down	7.5
Baldwin, James	If Beale Street Could Talk	6.7
Benchley, Peter	Jaws	5.3
Crichton, Michael	The Great Train Robbery	14.5
Le Carre, John	Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy	8.9
Lessing, Davis	The Summer before the Dark	9.8
Lurie, Alison	The War between the Tates	8.3
MacDonald, John D.	The Dreadful Lemon Sky	6.3
Meyer, Nicholas	The Seven - Per - Cent Solution	8.4
Updike, John	A Month of Sundays	7.0
Vonnegut, Kurt	Breakfast of Champions	7.9
West, Jessamyn	The Massacre at Fall Creek	6.7

Table 2


Average number of sentences per 100 words
25.0 20.0 16.7 14.3 12.5 11.1 10.0 9.2 8.3 7.5 7.1 6.7 6.3 5.8 5.5 5.3 5.0 4.8 4.5 4.3 4.2 4.0 3.7 3.6 2.8
108 112 116 120 124 128 132 136 140 144 148 152 156 160 164 168 172
(Short Words)
(Long Words)
Average number of syllables per 100 words
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
APPROXIMATE GRADE LEVEL
COLLEGE
GRAPH FOR ESTIMATING READING LEVEL
by Edward Fry, Rutgers University Reading Center

DIRECTIONS: Randomly select three 100 word passages from a book or article. Do not count proper nouns. Plot average number of syllables and average number of sentences per 100 words on graph to determine area of readability level. Choose more passages per book if great variability is observed. The upper right hand and lower left hand shaded corners are areas in which readability findings are considered unreliable.

(Note: The Readability Graph is not copyrighted. Anyone may reproduce it in any quantity, but the author and the editors would be pleased if this course is cited.--From JOURNAL OF READING, April, 1968, page 577.)

STUDENT=LOVE STORY

TABLE 3

TEXT TO BE ANALYZED

IF A SINGLE WORD CAN DESCRIBE OUR DAILY LIFE THOSE FIRST THREE YEARS IT IS SCROUNGE. EVERY WAKING MOMENT WE WERE CONCENTRATING ON HOW THE HELL WE WOULD BE ABLE TO SCRAPE UP ENOUGH DOUGH TO DO WHATEVER IT WAS WE HAD TO DO. USUALLY IT WAS JUST BREAK EVEN. AND THERE'S NOTHING ROMANTIC ABOUT IT EITHER. REMEMBER THE FAMOUS STANZA IN OMAR KHAYYAM--YOU KNOW THE BOOK OF VERSES UNDERNEATH THE BOUGH THE LOAF OF BREAD THE JUG OF WINE AND SO FORTH--SUBSTITUTE SCOTT ON TRUSTS FOR THAT BOOK OF VERSES AND SEE HOW THIS POETIC VISION STACKS UP AGAINST MY IDYLLIC EXISTENCE.

DISTRIBUTION OF WORDS BY SYLLABLES

SYLLABLES	WORDS
1	78
2	18
3	9
4	1

NUMBER OF SENTENCES=	7
NUMBER OF WORDS=	108
NUMBER OF SYLLABLES=	145
AVERAGE SENTENCE LENGTH=	15.1
AVERAGE SYLLABLES PER WORD=	1.4
FLESCH INDEX=	75.7
DALE INDEX=	7.5
GRADE LEVEL EQUIVALENT=	7.4

VOCABULARY TABLE

A	ABLE	ABOUT	AGAINST	AND
BE	BOOK	BOUGH	BREAD	BREAK
CAN	CONCENTRATING	DAILY	DESCRIBE	DO
DOUGH	DURING	EITHER	ENOUGH	EVEN
EVERY	EXISTENCE	FAMOUS	FIRST	FOR
FORTH	HAD	HELL	HOW	IDYLLIC
IF	IN	IS	IT	JUG
JUST	KHAYYAM	KNOW	LIFE	LOAF
MOMENT	MY	NOTHING	OF	OMAR
ON	OUR	POETIC	REMEMBER	ROMANTIC
SCOTT	SCRAPE	SCROUNGE	SEE	SINGLE
SO	STACKS	STANZA	SUBSTITUTE	THAT
THE	THERES	THIS	THOSE	THREE
TO	TRUSTS	UNDERNEATH	UP	USUALLY
VERSES	VISION	WAKING	WAS	WE
WERE	WHATEVER	WINE	WORD	WOULD
YEARS	YOU			

TOTAL VOCABULARY= 82

RATIO TO TOTAL WORDS IN TEXT= 0.774

NOTES

[1] Daniel N. Fader and Elton B. McNeil. Hooked on Books. New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1968, p. 85

[2] Fader, p. 85

[3] Fader, p. 85

[4] Fader, p. 2